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ABSTRACT

Since introducing a grammar unit can be daunting and frustrating for both teachers and students, a collaborative unit for a 10th-grade class was planned that would satisfy an administrative requirement but also maintain the integrity of the writing program. The unit was planned by developing an approach of non-intrusive grammar instruction at the computer based upon the work of Rei R. Noguchi. Noguchi's position derives from the polarized positions of the programmer instructors on the one side who place so much emphasis on mechanical errors that they "'red-ink' student writing to a fatal hemorrhage." and the "anti-grammar" teachers on the other side who basically ignore grammar mistakes in favor of content. Noguchi emphasizes the use of "operational" definitions by tapping the unconscious knowledge that all users of English already possess. By reading even the most preposterous student samples from a semantic perspective, almost all of them reveal, for example, an awareness of the concept of sentences. A sentence combining technique using a "matrix" and "insert" to produce a desired "result" showed that most students were able to identify incomplete or unclear sentence structures. The use of grammatical "tag" and "yes-no question" techniques also has proven effective in training students about sentence boundaries. Research results from the unit analysis bear this conclusion out: clearly, students had become more fluent at observing sentence boundaries throughout the unit. Part of the success can be attributed to the use of computers. Finally, student evaluations from the unit demonstrate that the objectives of the unit were satisfactorily achieved. (Three figures exhibiting the results of the study are attached.) (HB)

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Non-Intrusive Grammar in Writing

What does a secondary English teacher do when her administrator tells her to begin the school year with a unit on grammar? To the principal, this "unit" means changing sophomore students' writing so that "they punctuate things correctly, write in complete sentences, and know how to paragraph." To the English teacher, a grammar unit at the beginning of the school year means mixed signals for the students. It means talking about complete sentences and fragments or verbs and subjects, for example, and then convincing students that they should freewrite and do most of their drafting with no concern for mechanics or usage.

With this dilemma in mind, the two of us--one from secondary education, the other from post-secondary--began planning a collaborative unit that would satisfy the administrator but would also maintain the integrity of the writing program.

We decided, first, to work with an average 10th-grade class; then, we agreed on four objectives: (1) we wanted students to enjoy writing at the computer; (2) we wanted them to be able to write without initial concern for usage and spelling; (3) we wanted them to develop an awareness of the need for standard language usage, but (4) we wanted our unit's emphasis to concentrate on sentence-boundary errors.

Although the unit included literature, in addition to language and writing, this article will focus on the approach to non-intrusive grammar instruction at the computer which we are developing from Rei R. Noguchi's text Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits & Possibilities.

Noguchi constructs his position between the pro-grammar instructors on the one side who "place so much emphasis on the mechanical errors that they 'red-ink' student writing to a fatal hemorrhage" (13) and thus destroy interest in writing and writing improvement and the anti-grammar teachers, on the other side, who "see mechanical errors as unimportant, low-level 'surface' features which detract little from writing

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quality" (13), errors which students can easily address during an editing stage of the writing process. Noguchi sees both positions as "misguided and self-defeating" (14). The first does not offer instruction that transfers to improve student writings, and it discourages concern for writing improvement. The other position appears to consider surface errors (or "lapses in uses," according to Maxine Hairston) unimportant which many readers, particularly in business and other professional settings, perceive as characteristic of semi-literate writers. Furthermore, editing isn't easy for writers who don't recognize features as unconventional; they can't edit them out. Hence, Noguchi sees effective grammar instruction as that which is perceived as a tool for writing improvement and not as a subject in itself. Effective grammar instruction must be "integrated with writing . . . and presented as quickly as possible so that students can use it during the revision or proofreading stages of writing" (18).

His theory emphasizes the use of "operational" definitions rather than "semantic" definitions. Instead of teaching interlinking definitions such as "a sentence is any group of words which expresses a complete thought" (which requires, by the way, that we deal not only with the concept sentence but also with that of complete thought), Noguchi suggests that we tap the unconscious knowledge that all users of English already have. Those who speak the language have an immense awareness of its operations, including its syntax. This must be so, he explains, or users "would not be able to produce grammatical sentences in everyday conversation. This knowledge, however, is largely unconscious. Students normally cannot explain the operations, or rules, but the knowledge is . . . there" (43).

Operational definitions aren't as glitzy and as precise as nonoperational ones--but they don't have to be. All we needed in our approach were invisible strategies that would help our students as they sat revising or editing at their computers. We wanted

applications which they could use almost unconsciously, methods of checking what they had already written.

Noguchi's assertion that "speakers of English already know what a sentence is" became the basic assumption of the language and writing component of our unit. In order to decide how much our students already knew, we collected writing samples. We were dismayed when we looked at sentences such as these:

> **I ask the old lady if I could take some one with me she said no! you can't let any one know about it or you will have to stay in our town for ever, you see our world is the place were all old imagination go we little children grow up they forget what being a little kid is all about annd try to grow up to quickly** (Staci H.).

> **Know see it gets to be two problems too three problems because drug dealers kill people for money and the welfare people goes to the streets for money and the goverment throughs them one the streets and next thing you know all these people carring guns shot for money** (Danny T.), and

> **They say he's a devil worshiper and he's not he even says he isn't, no one believes him though** (Jennifer C.).

We had misgivings about what we might be able to do with many of these writers. Some of their chunks, punctuated with commas and periods, as if they were sentences, were preposterous. The writing looked out of control. We talked about our aims and our students; then we reread parts of Noguchi's text.

It was Noguchi's turn from a syntactic perspective to a semantic one which

reminded us of what we should be doing. Instead of reading their writings from a syntactic perspective and finding fragments, splices, and fused sentences, we tried reading their sentences through a semantic perspective. Read that way, most of the writings which we had collected revealed a concept of the sentence--and its boundaries. This sentence caught our attention: **"We had both brought some food and we had our dinner, 5 candy bars each, we each had 2 or 3 cokes, and for dessert we had some roasted marshmellows"** (Shawn M.). Not only did Shawn's sample show sentence awareness with its use of and to separate independent clauses, it also had a sophisticated concept for an average 10th-grade writer, an appositive phrase "5 candy bars each." As a result of our shift, we could see students expressing complete ideas but punctuating them unconventionally--and unacceptably. We agreed that we needed to show them how to use what they already tacitly knew about sentences.

As proof that speakers of English know what a sentence is, Noguchi claims that they have the ability to form grammatical TAG and YES-NO QUESTIONS on genuine sentences, yet they find the task impossible on nonsentences (53). "Let's see," we challenged, and thus began our testing of the limits and possibilities of Noguchi's theory for teaching grammar inside the writing process.

Although Noguchi's text suggests that students use, first, the TAG and YES-NO QUESTIONS during their revisions and then a sentence-combining strategy as a final test (55) for "sentencehood," we reversed the order when we taught these sentence-checking strategies. That is, for some reason, we began instead with sentence-combining exercises.

We have learned that teachers are not the center of a computer-supported classroom; instruction must be minimal when students have computers in front of them. So we decided to begin in the regular classroom. For the first session, we put

examples on the board and let the students complete them orally. We had to explain the terms "MATRIX," "INSERT," and "RESULT" as we were using them and emphasize that the MATRIX couldn't be changed; i.e., the words found in the MATRIX always had to be the same in the RESULT. This oral practice in the classroom introduced them to the technique we hoped they could eventually use and gave them a chance to experiment with this strategy within a safe environment--everyone would be talking and no one would notice a weird answer. Here are 2 examples we used.

MATRIX: **The cook put chicken in the soup.**
INSERT: They refused to believe the idea that
RESULT: They refused to believe the idea that **the cook put chicken in the soup.**

MATRIX: **Whether Samantha likes it or not.**
INSERT: They refused to believe the idea that
RESULT: They refused to believe the idea that **whether Samantha likes it or not.**

We talked about the RESULT in each exercise, exploring what it meant to them as readers or listeners and whether or not it satisfied their idea of sentence completeness. We never inserted our judgments in these discussions.

When we went to the lab and they opened their first document, they saw these examples repeated as we had done them in the classroom. On the second page of the lesson, they had four sentences/nonsentences written in this format:

MATRIX:
INSERT:
RESULT:

They were instructed to write a RESULT by placing the INSERT before the MATRIX. They worked for 20 to 30 minutes; then we asked them to scroll back through the RESULTS they had written, typing in their reactions to each one. Specifically, did each RESULT make sense to them or did they need more information? 8 of the 15 students in this class wrote RESULTS for all 4 MATRIXES (2 students were absent, and 3 students did the work but didn't succeed in saving it on their disks). Here are examples of their responses to this exercise. Comments for the

MATRIX: Enjoyed the football game on Saturday and the

RESULT: They refused to believe the idea that **enjoyed the football game on Saturday** ranged from "I don't think this line makes a complete sentence. Who enjoyed the football game?" (Bethany B. & Berit B.) to a brief "Doesn't make any since" (Christa H.). 2 students were unable or didn't have time to make any comments.

We used the same format for the next on-line exercise 2 weeks later. 14 students were present and all but 1 (Danny T.) made critical comments about the responses they wrote. We noticed, however, that this kind of exercise was difficult for the students. It worked only on declarative sentences and only with certain INSERTS. For example, some of the students tried a short-cut, using "They refused to believe that . . . " as their INSERT. As a result, a simple MATRIX such as "When she left," produced the RESULT: They refused to believe that when she left. That made good sense to some of them and indicated that "When she left" was a complete sentence. We questioned the value of using an INSERT as a "sentence checker" for these 10th-grade writers (particularly with the INSERTS which we used) and began using TAG QUESTIONS and YES-NO QUESTIONS in the next lesson.

In order to help students shift from the MATRIX/INSERT/RESULT format of sentence combining to that of asking TAG and YES-NO QUESTIONS, we used some

of the friendlier sentences from the last exercise as our examples. We spent one class period--in the regular room--talking about how to ask these questions. One of us would write a sentence or nonsentence on the board and ask for responses--first a TAG QUESTION and then a YES-NO QUESTION. As students suggested questions, we wrote them on the board and talked about them in full-class discussion. Their response was animated, and this operation appeared easier for them to handle.

When they used the technique the next day in the computer lab, Danny T., who had had great difficulty inserting one sentence onto the front of another sentence/nonsentence successfully and who was still composing only a few sentences during a writing session, transformed the first 2 sentences--Little children lose their teeth when they grow up and Scott enjoyed the wrestling match--into both TAG and YES-NO QUESTIONS. The 3rd sentence--If we had to do it all again and didn't know more than we know now, we would make the same mistakes--was too difficult for him. Jennifer C. wrote a TAG QUESTION easily but commented that "it's longer and it's hard to find something to go with it and make sense at the same time." Her YES-NO QUESTION was interesting: "If we had to do it all again and didn't know more than we know now, we would make the same mistakes, OR WOULD WE MAKE THINGS BETTER?" It doesn't include the expected **"wouldn't we?"** at the end. Unsure--or perhaps ahead of us--Jennifer engaged the content of the sentence instead.

Regardless of the many sentences that can be transformed into TAG or YES-NO QUESTIONS, "the operations that form [these] questions work properly only on genuine sentences" (53). Thus students find the transformation impossible with nonsentences. Cheryl H's YES-NO QUESTION response to "Whatever you could do to help my sister" was 'Could you do whatever you could to help my sister?" Unable to form the YES-NO QUESTION, Cheryl felt compelled to transform the fragment into

something which would work for her in the exercise. Although her response is forced and somewhat awkward, it's instructive. It includes some of the elements which could be added to the fragment to make it into a complete sentence. The YES-NO QUESTION which she wrote shows that the original utterance lacked a subject and a verb (or had faulty syntax). Her attempt to force a YES-NO QUESTION from that nonsentence reveals not only her unconscious knowledge of a complete sentence but also the strength of her knowledge.

In another situation, Jaime R. also demonstrated a tacit knowledge of sentence structure, yet hers was complicated by earlier instruction. She called us over to help her with the sentence "But sometimes she really gives me grief." Jaime explained: "I can put a tag . . . uh, a yes-no. . . uh, tag . . . uh, whatever, on it and it works like it does on a sentence. But this isn't a sentence."

"Sure it is," one of us answered.

"Huh uh," she countered; "sentences can't start with 'but.'"

During this project, the students freewrote and then produced 4 different drafts before editing for the final one. Although we had read all of their drafts and conferenced with them, we never marked or commented on mechanical, usage, or spelling errors in their writings. When they were editing, we reminded them of the sentence "checkers" which they could use to avoid nonsentences in their final pieces. We, however, did not force them to use those techniques. One sentence, written by Teresa B., still has a terminal YES-NO QUESTION which she may have used to check for sentence completeness: "The first thing she did when she got [there] was go through the mirror maze at the carnival didn't she."

Near the end of our unit, we began looking at students' papers for evidence of the Limits & Possibilities of Noguchi's theory. Specifically, where did our teaching of sentence boundaries inside the writing process work for students and where did it

appear to be ineffective? We found that we had more success using the TAG and YES-NO QUESTIONS than we did using the INSERT. We may have assumed too much; i.e., we assumed that students would be able to insert a phrase at the beginning of any utterance. Frankly, they often were unable to do that; many lost (or miscopied) words in the INSERT when they were copying it onto the beginning of the MATRIX. But, more significantly, the INSERT we used was long and unwieldy for them; shorter ones were unreliable.

The question uppermost in our minds, however, was **to what extent are our students observing sentence boundaries?** When we began reading their pieces, we noticed, first, that the students had become more fluent during this experiment (Figure 1). At the beginning of the process-writing assignment, the class averaged 127 words per writing. Each time they wrote, that average increased: 182.5, 216, and, on the final writing, the class average was 422.666 words per essay (Figure 2). That's an average gain of 206 words or 233%. We can show some individual results by looking at the most and the least fluent writers in the class. Cheryl H. wrote 908 words in her final draft (3.6 typed pages). She had 3 sentence-boundary errors (1 c.s. & 2 frags.). Danny T., at the other end of the scale, ranked at or below the 31st percentile on the P-ACT in English, a standardized exam given to sophomores in October 1991, and scored 05 in English usage/mechanics (<u>average</u> is 8-9). Yet he wrote 238 words (1 typed page) in his final draft (which represents a 213% gain) and had 1 sentence-boundary error, a fused sentence.

Part of this writing success is because of the computers. None of these students had previously used them for writing, but after they became comfortable, they wanted to go to the lab as often as possible. On Good Friday, a school day which students traditionally skip, Bethany B. came only to our class because, as she explained: "We are going to the writing lab."

Another possibility for their success is that, because we did not teach formal English grammar, our students were not concerned about mechanics and usage as they wrote. Instead, we gave them a method for checking for sentence completeness and asked them to use that strategy before writing their final drafts.

After looking at their self-evaluations, we had an additional insight into their success. When asked to evaluate their work and to explain the basis for that grade, most gave themselves something in the B range, explaining that they could have done better. Several commented that they hadn't written much in school. Most of their writing experiences had been taking notes, writing reports, and writing exams. Jaime R. said that in her other English classes, "students read stories; they didn't write them." None of the students commented on their "grammar" in relation to their evaluations. Instead, their typical criterion for "good" writing was making it "sound good to others" and they believed that they achieved this by "explaining more," i.e., by adding more details.

In her self-evaluation, Christa H. spoke to 2 of our objectives, namely, to enable students to enjoy writing at the computer and to develop an awareness of effective writing. She explained candidly: "I am not a very good writer. . . . I didn't write alot when I was little, so I don't really like to write." When asked to find something which she didn't like and would improve if she had the time, Christa expressed pleasure in what she had written: "I couldn't find anything that I didn't like in this." She gave her writing packet a B+ and explained: "Besides the fact that I am not a good writer, I think I did a good job."

We cannot claim that our 15 students learned to avoid sentence-boundary errors in their writing. They didn't. In fact, 3 students have an excessive number of boundary errors (Figure 3) . Yet it's significant that 12 students appear to be checking and then revising their sentences. In fact, the results of our experiment are so significant (and

promising) to the administrator and the counselors that they are scheduling this group of students together again next year and assigning them to the same teacher for a continuation of the collaborative experiment with non-intrusive grammar in the writing process.

Perhaps the most poignant and the most powerful comment came at the end of this year's unit from Berit B., an ESL student from Denmark. She looked at the writing she had done and explained: "I like this part because when I read it, I can hear my own voice. . . . it sounds like me talking and nobody else." This is the power we want to give to all our regular English students.

WORD COUNT (FIGURE 1)

	Bethany B.	Berit B.	Teresa B.	Jennifer C.	James C.	John C.	Bobby D.	Christa H.	Cheryl H.	Staci H.	Ajit K.	Shawn M.	Jaime R.	Chris S.	Danny T.
FINAL PIECE	632	633	378	257	406	390	524	431	908	227	403	242	479	192	238
Working Draft #2	219	296	145	261	242	77	333	177	337	230	208	111	273	ABS	115
Working Draft #1	315	281	ABS	218	ABS	54	ABS	203	306	219	140	88	200	47	119
Exploratory Writing	ABS	145	48	95	152	69	209	117	193	155	119	181	148	73	76

Average # of Words for First Writing . .127

Average # of Words for Final Writing . .423 Words Gained . . . 296 or 233%

WORD GAIN -- FLUENCY (FIGURE 2)

	Bethany B.	Berit B.	Teresa B.	Jennifer C.	James C.	John C.	Bobby D.	Christa H.	Cheryl H.	Staci H.	Ajit K.	Shawn M.	Jaime R.	Chris S.	Danny T.
S-B errors / pg	4	1.6	.75	5	1.9	5.3	7.5	1.2	1.2	10	2	1	2	1	1
% gain	-----	337%	688%	171%	167%	465%	315%	268%	370%	46%	239%	34%	224%	163%	213%
word gain	-----	488	330	162	254	321	315	314	715	72	284	61	331	119	162
Total Words	632	633	378	257	406	390	524	431	908	227	403	242	479	192	238
# words on exp	-----	145	48	95	152	69	209	117	193	155	119	181	148	73	76

SENTENCE-BOUNDARY ERRORS (FIGURE 3)

	Bethany B.	Berit B.	Teresa B.	Jennifer C.	James C.	John C.	Bobby D.	Christa H.	Cheryl H.	Staci H.	Ajit K.	Shawn M.	Jaime R.	Chris S.	Danny T.
/ page	4	1.6	.75	5	1.9	5.3	7.5	1.2	1.2	10	2	1	2	1	1
TOTAL	10	4	2	5	3	8	15	3	3	10	3	1	4	1	1
Comma splices	10	4	2	5	1	0	7	1	1	3	1	1	3	0	0
Frag-ments	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	2	2	0	2	0	1	0	0
Fused sents.	0	0	0	0	1	5	7	0	0	7	0	0	0	1	1

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